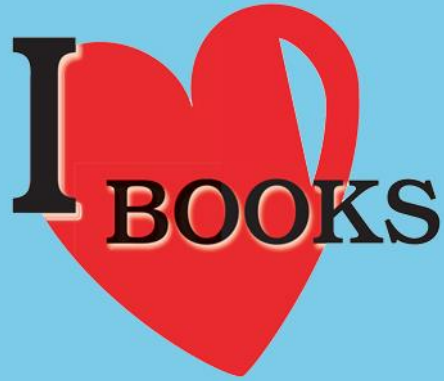




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Opening extract from
There May be a Castle

Written by
Piers Torday

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Mouse Mallory didn't like Christmas.

There, he'd said it. Or rather, *thought* it, because Mouse Mallory was more a thinker than a talker. (Or, as everyone else called him, a daydreamer.) Yes, he decided, I am eleven years old and I don't like Christmas – even if it *was* Christmas Eve. And even if his mum *was* going crazy trying to get him and his two sisters ready for their annual festive trip to her parents, over on the other side of the hills.

'Mouse!' Mrs Mallory's voice sailed down the stairs after her, along with different-coloured socks flying off the pile of laundry in her arms. 'I really hope that when I come back up you aren't just going to be standing there, and that your bag will be packed! We leave in one hour. *One* hour.'

Mouse stayed exactly where he was, on the landing,

clutching his rucksack. He peered inside. It might look unpacked to some people. But Mouse could see, right at the bottom, the only thing he ever needed to take anywhere: his toy horse, Nonky.

Even if everyone did say he was too old to be carrying toy horses around.

‘Do you really need that?’ his mum would complain. ‘I’ve washed it a thousand times and it still stinks of trainers. You’re too grown-up to be playing with a babyish toy like that.’

‘You’re such a *little* boy sometimes,’ his big sister Violet would often add.

It’s true – he was a little boy. His dad was stout, his mum wasn’t very tall and Mouse was . . . well, rather small. In fact, he was the smallest in his year. That was why Albert Thomas Mallory was known universally as Mouse.

‘So small, and so full of questions, like a curious little mouse,’ his dad used to say when he was younger. Mouse had never been short of a question, that’s for sure. Why is the sky blue? What does that button do? Will I ever get bigger? Not even his doctor could answer the last one for sure.

Maybe he would always be shorter than everyone else.

This left him with so many worries about the future.

Such as, would he ever be tall enough to go on the biggest roller coaster in the world?

But Mouse knew Violet didn't just mean that.

She meant that he acted little as well. He was eleven and apparently that meant he had to read books that had more words than pictures, or even no pictures. He was supposed to be able to sleep with the lights off, and everyone said he was too old to carry a stuffed toy around with him all the time.

Mouse didn't get what the problem was.

It wasn't as if Nonky was like the toys Esme still played with. He didn't play a lullaby if you pulled a string and he definitely didn't get chewed at night. (Any more.) Nonky had been a present from his dad – quite a long time ago, but not that long ago. Once he had been a fighting horse with a mounted knight, but his rider had since departed to the Giant Toy Crate in the Sky, and he was also missing an eye.

When his dad gave him Nonky, Mouse was too young to tell the difference between a horse and a donkey. He also couldn't pronounce 'donkey' – so 'Nonky' it had been from the get-go, and Nonky it had stayed.

Unlike Dad, Nonky hadn't run off to Florida with a software developer he met online called Carla. Mouse hoped she appreciated his terrible songs and corny jokes. He was

surprised at how much he actually missed them.

But Nonky didn't force those on him either. Nonky never yelled when he was late for school and never sulked when he didn't want to play with him. Nonky smelt of the past and the good old days. He was soft, machine washable and made Mouse feel safe.

He was special.

And what else, really, did Mouse need to take with him? (Apart from some clean pants, and his mum was bound to pack those anyway.)

'Mum's going to kill you,' said Violet – who was much taller than him, even though she was only a year and a half older – leaning against the doorway opposite.

'Why?'

'Because you're always daydreaming and never ready on time,' said Violet. 'She's going to skin you alive, and then boil you—' She swerved out of the way just in time to avoid the rucksack being swung in her direction. 'Didn't you check the weather on your phone? There's more snow coming in, and ice too . . . so she wants to make it across the hills before it gets dark.' She clapped her hands. 'It's Christmas, Mouse!'

Mouse muttered into his jumper, not looking at her. 'I hate Christmas.'

‘What? This is new. Give me one good reason to hate Christmas.’

Mouse kept his voice and words fixed on the floor. ‘Presents,’ he said.

Violet stared at him in disbelief. ‘Don’t talk rubbish! Everyone likes presents.’

He shrugged. ‘Not if they’re all stupid books.’

Last Christmas his grandfather had given him a copy of *Alice in Wonderland* and *The Tales of King Arthur*. Boring, bound in leather and with no pictures on the cover.

‘To help you start a library,’ he had said hopefully, peering over his glasses.

But Mouse thought starting a library sounded too much like hard work. There was clearing a site and laying concrete foundations for starters, not to mention lugging heavy boxes of books about. And having to be quiet *all* the time.

He had slogged through the books from Gramps anyhow, which smelt of old furniture drawers and glue. At least the pictures inside were good, especially the ones of the strange creatures Alice met down the rabbit hole or the knights in armour fighting battles. Still, there weren’t enough of them, or any animations like in an app or a game. And what was the point of a book without pictures or animations?

‘You only don’t like books because you’re a boy,’ said

Violet. 'It's not your fault nature designed you without a reading brain, unlike girls. It does unfortunately mean that I will get to be prime minister one day while you will only be allowed to drive my car.'

Before Mouse could respond, Esme trundled across the landing in front of him on her trike. Clashed between her knees was the shredded remains of a stale chocolate egg, the rest of which was smeared over her face and hands.

'Choclit,' said Esme. 'Easta,' she added, just in case she hadn't made herself clear.

'No,' said Mouse, '*Christmas*. Christmas Eve. Look.'

He pointed to the gabled window behind them. Shimmering icicles, as sharp as prehistoric spears, twisted down from the eaves outside. From time to time a tip dropped off with an alarming crack. The fresh snow seemed to make everything quieter and louder at the same time. A robin strutted on the frosted sill beneath the icy spears, oblivious to the danger dangling above his head.

The snow carpeted the flat roof of the kitchen below, dotted the rails of the climbing frame in the garden and caked so much of the shed that it almost disappeared from view. For the rest of the year, East Burn didn't look like much: an old farmhouse on the edge of the moors. Today it looked like even less – just another block of white in a land of

white. In fact, if you had been flying overhead, you might have missed it completely.

As if it wasn't even there at all.

Mouse watched Esme look at the icicles. She looked at the snow. She looked at the robin, which made her smile. And finally she turned back to Mouse. 'Easta,' she declared, and cycled off into the next room, leaving a trail of chocolate behind her. The robin stared at the crumbs through the window and tapped his beak against the glass greedily.

Mouse shook his head at the world outside. 'Snow,' he said. 'That's another reason to hate Christmas.'

'But this is the first white Christmas in five years!' exploded Violet.

'So? It doesn't make sense. When there's no snow, everyone says it's climate change. But when there is snow, like this year, everyone says it's—'

'Climate change.'

'See? They can't have it both ways.'

'What about snowmen? Sledging?'

'I'm not like you. I'm not good at any of that stuff. Making things, sport . . . I'm only little.'

'You can't use that as an excuse for everything, Mouse Mallory. Don't you even like going for a walk in the snow?'

He snorted. 'Like the one we'll have to go on after lunch

tomorrow with Granny and Gramps? That's not a walk, that's a route march.' Mouse began a mental to-do list: 1. Find out if the United Nations has a policy on forced marches after Christmas lunch.

'You think you can get away with anything because you're so cute, don't you?' said Violet, grabbing Mouse in a headlock and mussing his hair.

'Gerroff!' he said, flushing and wriggling free. 'No, I don't.'

'Yes, you do, and one day even you are going to have to grow up,' she said, closing her door on him.

He shrugged. There were so many good reasons not to like Christmas, like the teachers at school wearing tinsel over their ties, or, even worse, Christmas jumpers. As if they were Santa's little helpers, when they were still in fact *teachers*.

It was just pretend and make-believe.

That thought made Mouse feel uncomfortable. His chest tightened, his cheeks flushed and his hands clenched into fists. Because he remembered something that made him rage inside.

The kind of rage that isn't fixed by shiny wrapping paper or a toy reindeer with a glowing nose dancing to a disco beat.

It was the real reason why he didn't like Christmas.